

## Religious Talk Online

In the online world, people argue about anything and everything – religion is no exception. Stephen Pihlaja investigates how several prominent social media figures present views about religion in an environment where their positions are challenged. The analysis shows how conflict creates a space for users to share, explain, and develop their opinions and beliefs, by making appeals to both a core audience of like-minded viewers and a broader audience of viewers who are potentially interested in the claims, whether ambivalent, or openly hostile. The book argues that in the back-and-forth of these arguments, the positions that users take in response to the arguments of others have consequences for how religious talk develops, and potentially for how people understand and practice their beliefs in the twenty-first century. Based on original empirical research, it addresses long-debated questions in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis regarding the role of language in building solidarity, defining identity, and establishing genres and registers of interaction.

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# Religious Talk Online

*The Evangelical Discourse of Muslims,  
Christians, and Atheists*

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## Preface

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A book on religious talk online is likely to attract interest from three broad groups: people interested in religion, people interested in language, and people interested in the Internet. However, given the nature of academic research, it is unlikely that one person will be doing work in all three areas. The studies of “religion” and “talk” in particular are likely to draw audiences from decidedly different theoretical and methodological backgrounds.

As the author of the book, and a scholar interested in both these topics, a mixture of methods and theories is what makes academic work interesting to me – the ability to learn from and speak across disciplinary boundaries to describe and analyze the social world. For me, the joy of writing a book like this one is how to bring different scholars together at the same table with a shared focus on understanding religious life and experience through analysis of language use.

At the same time, you may find this book frustrating, depending on your discipline. If you’re a linguist, you may likely find the work to be less empirical than you’d like, with less data than you’d expect in a monograph focusing on language. If you’re a religious studies scholar, you might find yourself looking for a more nuanced discussion of things like religious identity and the sociohistorical context of the interactions I’m writing about.

Knowing this tension exists, I have attempted to write *Religious Talk Online* in a way that appeals to both audiences, but more importantly, provides a rigorous, empirical analysis of the language data. For me, as a scholar – a stylistician and discourse analyst – analysis is useful when it is valid and reliable and tells us something about the nature of reality and how language and society are mutually shaping forces.

Importantly, religious discourse remains relatively unrepresented in the field of communication and language study, with the best research being done by scholars in religious studies. This book is an attempt to address that gap in a small way and to bring discussion about religious discourse back into focus, particularly in a moment when technology is again playing an important role in the emergence of atheism.

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Finally, discussions of faith and religion are often extremely personal. Interaction around faith online, moreover, can be laced with negativity and insults. Throughout this book, I've attempted to include examples of text and talk that are typical of the contexts I'm investigating but do not reflect my own opinions or beliefs about the users. *Religious Talk Online* is a snapshot of a moment in history, when social media played a key role in how some people expressed their own faith and used new technology to reach out to others. By focusing on this moment, we will see how historical ways of doing interreligious dialogue present themselves in new contexts and the effects technology can have on how differences in belief are managed and negotiated, and how its lasting effects might be seen on the role of religion in social life.

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